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The wrong way to promote women

Mandatory quotas do more harm than good. But firms should make work more family-friendly



WOMEN are half the population but only 15% of board members at big American firms, and 10% in Europe. This represents a squandered opportunity. Companies that fish in only half of the talent pool will lose out to those that cast their net more widely. There is also evidence that mixed boards make better decisions than monolithically male ones do. When a board includes a variety of viewpoints and attitudes, the boss's bad ideas are more likely to be challenged.

Mindful of this, European countries are passing laws that would force companies to promote more women to the executive suite. A new French law requires listed firms to reserve 40% of board seats for women by 2017. Norway and Spain have similar laws; Germany is considering one. The European Parliament declared this month that such quotas should be applied throughout the EU. Viviane Reding, the EU's justice commissioner, says she wants European boards to be 30% female by 2015 and 40% by 2020.

There are two main arguments for compulsory quotas. One is that the men who dominate corporate boards are incorrigibly sexist: they promote people like themselves and ignore any talent that lacks a Y chromosome. Only force can change their chauvinist ways.

The second argument is more subtle. Talented executives need mentors to help them climb the ladder. Male directors mentor young men but are reluctant to get chummy with young women, lest the relationship be misconstrued. Quotas will break this vicious cycle by putting lots of women at the top, who can then offer their sisters a leg up.

There may be something in both arguments, but in most rich countries sexism and the lack of role models are no longer the main obstacle to women's careers. Children are. Most women take career breaks to look after them. Many care for elderly relatives, too. One study found that two-thirds of American women had at some point switched from full-time work to part-time or flexible time to balance work and family. Such choices should be respected. But they make it harder for women to gain the experience necessary to make it to the very top.

What is more, big companies are increasingly global. Many want a boss who has worked in more than one country. Such foreign postings disrupt families; many women turn them down. Many also prefer not to prolong their working day by networking after hours. And many, anticipating a career break at some point in the future, enter fields where their skills will not quickly become obsolete, such as law or human resources. Some lawyers make good chief executives. But firms often want people with financial or operational experience for the top jobs, and these fields are still male-dominated.

Quotas are too blunt a tool for such a tangled problem. The women companies are compelled to put on boards are unlikely to be as useful as those they place there voluntarily. Quotas force firms either to pad their boards with token non-executive directors, or to allocate real power on the basis of sex rather than merit. Neither is good for corporate governance. Norway started enforcing quotas for women in 2006. A study by the University of Michigan

found that this led to large numbers of inexperienced women being appointed to boards, and that this has seriously damaged those firms' performance.

Flexibility, not force

A less coercive approach is preferable. Companies that want to attract the best talent must think hard about how to make work more family-friendly. Must managers meet their staff face-to-face every day? Technology makes telecommuting easier (and it facilitates networking beyond male-dominated bars and golf courses). Wise firms will strive to remove barriers for women. The proportion of women in top jobs may remain lower than governments would like, partly because prejudices about women and work have deep roots. But firms that address the question most skilfully will win the talent war, and reap the rewards. (656)

THE ECONOMIST, July 23rd 2011 | from the print edition

Schools failing to help girls escape career stereotypes

- Jeevan Vasagar, education editor
- guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 12 April 2011

Mixed-sex schools are not doing enough to promote girls' confidence and ambitions, according to an Ofsted survey, which finds that work placements for young women are almost all in "stereotypically female" occupations such as hair salons.

Single-sex schools say they find it easier to promote confidence and a competitive attitude in the absence of boys, but inspectors found that even in these schools the pattern of entries for GCSE and A-level subjects conformed with the national picture of girls' choices. In all the schools Ofsted visited, girls mainly chose courses such as dance, art, textiles, and health and social care.

While there is a widening gap between girls and boys' performance at GCSE – last summer 72.6% of girls passed at A* to C, compared with 65.4% of boys – this has not translated into advantages in careers or pay.

Ofsted's survey finds that schools are not using work experience to challenge gender stereotypes. Out of more than 1,700 examples of work placements, less than a tenth were "unconventional", while the vast majority were in education, hair and beauty, offices and shops.

In the few examples where girls set out on an unfamiliar route, this had often come about after a personal experience. In one case, a girl in the first year of GCSE studies was determined to become a forensic scientist after watching a crime officer dealing with a burglary at her father's shop.

The most positive attitudes were found in single-sex schools, where most of the girls said they would definitely consider jobs stereotypically done by men. In selective schools, girls did not view any career as being closed to them, as long as they worked hard and got the relevant qualifications. They felt that more women should be encouraged into roles traditionally done by men.

However, this confident thinking was not matched by any noticeable shift away from gender-typical course or career choices. "Almost all of these girls told inspectors that they were not planning to pursue such a route for themselves," the report says.

Explicit teaching about career breaks, the impact of raising a family and how careers develop through promotion was rare in all the schools visited for the

survey. Little information about starting salaries, promotion prospects and earning potential was available, and girls had no clear idea what these might be. "This was a major shortfall in the information available to young people making choices in these schools, irrespective of gender," the report says.

A report commissioned by the last government found that women are "crowded into a narrow range of lower-paying occupations, mainly those available part-time", though there is some evidence that young women are now earning more than young men.

In the last decade, girls have become more likely to pick certain A-level subjects, such as maths or technology, which have been male-dominated. More girls than boys do biology A-level, while chemistry is close to being evenly balanced. But the proportion of girls taking physics has fallen slightly, from 23% in 2000 to 21% in 2010.

Course choices were overwhelmingly gender-stereotypical in all the 10 further education colleges Ofsted visited.

Construction, motor vehicle and engineering departments remained predominantly male. Areas such as health, social care, childcare, hairdressing and beauty therapy remained primarily the choice of female students.

Brian Lightman, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "Employers have a key role to play in challenging gender stereotypes in the workplace, by encouraging girls to take on work placements in male-dominated fields and providing female role models.

"Schools and colleges want to provide relevant, worthwhile work-based learning, but they are dependent on local businesses agreeing to take on students. Companies must do more to support schools and colleges in making high-quality work placements available.

The single-sex girls' schools visited had various approaches to challenging stereotypical choices, including the use of positive female role models and successful former students returning to the school to share experiences of work. (656)

Then a woman from a mid-market tabloid asked a question, also routine, something of an old chestnut, and Beard replied, as he thought, blandly. It was true, women were under-represented in physics and always had been. The problem had often been discussed, and (he was mindful of Professor Temple as he said it) certainly his committee would be looking at it again to see if there were new ways of encouraging more girls into the subject. He believed there were no longer any institutional barriers or prejudices. There were other branches of science where women were well represented, and some where they predominated. And then, because he was boring himself, he added that it might have to be accepted one day that a ceiling had been reached. Although there were many gifted women physicists, it was at least conceivable that they would always remain in a minority, albeit a substantial one, in this particular field. There might always be more men than women who *wanted* to work in physics. There was a consensus in cognitive psychology, based on a wide range of experimental work, that in statistical terms the brains of men and women were significantly different. This was emphatically not a question of gender superiority, nor was it a matter of social conditioning, though of course it played a reinforcing role. These were widely observed innate differences in cognitive ability. In studies and metastudies, women were shown to have, on average, greater language skills, better visual memory, clearer emotional judgement and superior mathematical calculation. Men scored higher in mathematical problem-solving and abstract reasoning, and in visual-spatial awareness. Men and women had different priorities in life, different attitudes to risk, to status, to hierarchies. Above all, and this was the really striking difference, amounting roughly to one standard deviation, and the one to have been studied repeatedly: from early in life, girls tended to be more interested in people, boys more in things and abstract rules. And this difference showed in the fields of science they tended to choose: more women in the life sciences, more men in engineering and physics.

Beard noticed that he was losing the room's attention. Phrases like 'standard deviation' generally had this effect on journalists. A few people at the back were talking among themselves. In the front row, a gentlemanly reporter of a certain age had closed his eyes. Beard pressed on towards his conclusion. There was surely much to be done to get more women into physics and to make them feel welcome there. But in one possible future, it might be a waste of effort to strive for parity when there were other branches of study that women preferred.

The journalist who had asked the question was nodding numbly. Behind her, someone else was starting to ask an unrelated question. The morning would have passed into oblivion like any other had not at that moment the professor of science suddenly stood, blushing pink, squared her papers against the table with a loud rap and announced to the room, 'Before I go outside to be sick, and I mean violently sick because of what I've just heard, I wish to announce my resignation from Professor Beard's committee.' (534)

Ian McEwan, *SOLAR*, p. 183-185, Vintage Books, 2010

An undated cartoon



"Welcome aboard. This is your captain, Margaret Williamson, speaking."